

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

For Release on Receipt (September 8, 1975)

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## DIPLOMACY AND RESEARCH: HOPE FOR WORLD'S MARINE MAMMALS

Two of man's most highly developed skills, international diplomacy and space satellite technology, were among the tools employed last year to carve a more secure place for marine mammals in the world's environments.

As a result, the outlook for polar bears, walruses, sea otters, manatees, and dugongs remains hopeful. From Alaska to Timbuktu, State, Federal, and international organizations combined efforts in an exceptional spirit of cooperation to protect these valuable resources and ensure their survival. Some of the species are already endangered; others face the potential threat of habitat destruction caused by man's development of land and energy resources.

The status of the world's marine mammals was reported to Congress recently by Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The report is required annually by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 which makes the Interior Department responsible for walruses, polar bears, sea otters, manatees, and dugongs, and the National Marine Fisheries Service of the Department of Commerce responsible for whales, porpoises, seals, and sea lions. The major objective of the Act is to ensure the continued survival of these animals in their habitats through international negotiations, research, and cooperation with State agencies.

Much progress was made toward these goals last year, especially in the area of research. Marine mammals are particularly difficult to study, and little is known about them because of their inaccessibility and aquatic

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nature. Some are solitary creatures and prefer highly inaccessible habitats such as floating arctic ice packs. So researchers have had to devise some unusual techniques to learn more about them.

Among the more sophisticated is the use of satellites and telemetry to monitor the movements of specific animals. One such study of polar bears required the development of a radio transmitting collar that is fitted around the bear's neck. Its signals are picked up by an orbiting NASA Nimbus F satellite. Another cooperative study using limpet devices implanted under the skin of walruses will help to develop ecological models for predicting numbers and distribution of walruses in the sea-ice ecosystems of the Bering and Chukchi Seas. The device bounces back radio waves sent down by aircraft and satellite. Similar techniques will be used to study the California sea otter population.

Numerous behavioral, physiological, and demographic projects are underway on each marine mammal species using computers, aircraft, and intensive field studies. One study, funded by a new grant-in-aid program established by the Marine Mammal Act, will concentrate on compiling a comprehensive natural history of the manatee. Since manatees, with a population estimated to be as low as 1,000, are considered an endangered species in the United States, none of the animals can be sacrificed for study. The project will make maximum use of museum specimens, and autopsies will be performed on all dead carcasses found. Data will be collected on body measurements, organ weights, pesticide and trace metal residues, parasites, diseases, reproductive condition, and tissues will be collected for histology and pathology.

A new field station in Gainesville, Florida, was established last year by the Fish and Wildlife Service to begin research on manatees and dugongs. The facility will also help treat and rehabilitate injured manatees which are commonly cut by motor boat propellers in the canals.

Over \$725,000 will be spent this year for marine mammal research in Alaska waters as part of Interior's Outer Continental Shelf baseline studies for oil and gas development. The Fish and Wildlife Service has been designated as coordinator for the marine mammal and sea bird portion of these studies.

Under the Marine Mammal Act, a moratorium was placed on the taking of marine mammals by U.S. citizens, ending the sport hunting of polar bears and walruses in Alaska. The law also banned the importation of polar bear

skins from Canada as well as marine mammal parts and hunting trophies from other countries. Limited exceptions were allowed so that Alaskan Natives could continue taking animals for subsistence and for traditional native handicrafts.

A provision in the Act allows the waiver of the moratorium when requested by a State if the State submits an acceptable management plan to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This summer initial steps were taken to return management of the Pacific walrus to the State of Alaska.

But probably the greatest hope for the world's marine mammals is the cooperation exhibited by the international community. Several symposiums and study groups met last year to discuss recently completed research and to coordinate further studies to be undertaken in the future. Much of the research is on a cooperative basis and includes exchange of top scientists in the marine mammal scientific community. In one such exchange a biologist from the Soviet Union participated in a field study of walrus and a Fish and Wildlife Service researcher attended a walrus meeting in Leningrad.

Much progress has also been made under an international agreement on the conservation of polar bears. The agreement, which promotes research and conservation, was drafted in 1973 by the five polar bear nations: Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States.

The polar bear group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources met in Switzerland last December to discuss biology and habitat preservation and map out further international bear management problems.

A treaty signed by 80 countries to limit international trade in endangered species went into effect in July of this year. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora established a system of regulations designed to prevent the commercial over-exploitation of wild plants and animals. Trade regulations are geared to the degree each species is threatened with extinction and the contribution which trade makes to such a threat. Currently, the Southern sea otter, dugong, and the West Indian and South American manatees are on Appendix I of the convention and cannot be placed in international commerce. Polar bear, the Australian dugong, and West African manatee can be traded only with specific permits from both the exporting and importing country.

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EDITORS: Photos of these animals are available by calling 202/343-8770. Status reports of individual species are also available by calling 202/343-9442.

